

Pioneer Press: Gurnee Review, May 27, 2004

Governor declares disaster area

After touring the flooded areas of Gurnee and Des Plaines via helicopter Wednesday morning, Gov. Rod Blagojevich declared Lake County, along with six Cook County townships, disaster areas.

Water levels pushed up by a series of heavy rain storms in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois led to the highest water level in the Des Plaines River in two decades. The river crested Tuesday afternoon at 11.69 feet, just short of the record 11.95 feet set during the flood of 1986. In Gurnee, the river is considered to be at flood level when it reaches 7 feet.

"We're receding now," Gurnee Mayor Don Rudny said. "We were concerned the crest would get over 12 feet, but it never did that."

What the flood waters did do, though, was cause extensive damage to homes and business in the flood plain. The flooding shut down major sections of roads including Grand Avenue from Route 41 to Route 21, Old Grand Avenue from Depot Road to Grand Avenue, Kilbourne Road and the intersection of Grand Avenue and O'Plaine Road. The flooding also closed schools and businesses, created mini-lakes in residents' backyards and brought the community together through a tremendous volunteer effort that saved Gurnee Grade School and other properties from even further damage.

"It's been a very emotional time for the village of Gurnee," Rudny said.

"I toured the flooding and it's very clear from up there the extent of the damage," Blagojevich said from the O'Plaine campus of Warren Township High School. "I am officially declaring this part of Illinois and Lake County a disaster area."

Since the beginning of May, Gurnee recorded 7.17 inches of rain at the Cemetery Road pump station. The heaviest downpours occurred May 18 (1.62 inches) and early Sunday when nearly

2 inches poured through the clouds bringing along clapping thunder, bolts of lightning and marble-sized hail.

The National Weather Service issued a flood warning Saturday for the Des Plaines River and predicted the heavy flooding in Gurnee that forced the closing of Gurnee Grade School and the O'Plaine campus of Warren Township High School. Businesses along Old Grand Avenue, Gurnee Park District facilities and homes were evacuated.

"We were much more prepared this time than in 1986," Rudny said.

The flood of 1986 had come rather suddenly, leaving residents precious time to protect their property. Thanks to early reports this year from the National Weather Service and officials watching Des Plaines River water levels throughout the rains, the village had sufficient warning.

Volunteers praised

During the press conference, Rudny praised the large volunteer effort from Gurnee residents, high school students, Great Lakes Navy personnel and others. "It showed that in times of disaster and need, American citizens come together."

Gurnee Grade School, located on flooded Kilbourne Road, was saved thanks to the efforts of hundreds of volunteers. Rudny said residents were determined to save the school, which flooded in 1986. The building, which houses the District 56 administrative offices and park district programs, re-opened to classroom use this school year after being renovated with existing district funds.

District 56 Superintendent Ben Martindale said at Wednesday's press conference: "We've met the challenge and have a building that's been saved. It was saved because of the efforts of the community."

Although there is 4.5 feet of water sitting outside the school, the hundreds of sandbags stacked by volunteers served as a wall of protection. "We'll clean up as soon as the river recedes and open the school," Martindale said.

More than 400 sailors were sent to help Gurnee. "Without the help of our U.S. Navy, the Gurnee Grade School would be sitting under water," U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, stated.

Pat Bleck, a resident who helped organize the volunteer effort at Gurnee Grade School, said volunteers had heard a rumor that the school had taken on water, and that spurred them to work even harder to protect the building. "We weren't going to give up the ship," he said.

Rudny gave special thanks to Tim Hubbard, son of Fire Capt. Joe Hubbard, for his outstanding efforts to coordinate hundreds of volunteers to sandbag and help save property. Hubbard, a military reservist, is shipping out for active duty Tuesday. Various village officials and community members threw him a going away party Wednesday night in the tent of the command center at the high school.

Police and fire personnel worked 12-hour shifts throughout the week. Fire Station 1 on Old Grand Avenue suffered some flooding and operations had to be moved into the basement of the new police facility at O'Plaine and Washington Street.

"Gurnee would not be the town that it is if it weren't for the public safety team," Rudny noted.

Gov. Blagojevich said the next step after declaring Lake County a disaster area, will be for the federal government to assess the flood damage. Blagojevich said the feds need to come in and help Lake County as they did for the community of Utica, which suffered extensive damage from tornadoes earlier this month.

According to the governor's office, when the water recedes, a joint state and federal preliminary damage assessment will be conducted to determine whether the extent of the damage to homes and businesses and the costs incurred by local governments during their emergency response meet the qualifying standards for federal assistance.

"I am urging the federal government to be as helpful as it can possibly be," Blagojevich said.

Village Trustee Tom Chamberlain said they cannot say how much the flood will cost the village but he guessed it would be "hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"It's something to worry about later. Hopefully with some federal and state aid, we'll get reimbursed."

Cleaning up

When the flood waters recede, clean-up efforts can begin. Rudny said the hundreds of thousands of sandbags will be carted over to public works and emptied.

"The job's not over. We've got a lot of work ahead of us," Rudny said. "We need tons of volunteers."

The American Red Cross is expected to deliver clean-up kits to Gurnee. The Salvation Army will also be assisting the community.

The village's volunteer hotline number is (847) 599-7010. The number for the police Emergency Operations Center is (847) 244-2940. For information on making a flood relief donation, call (847) 244-5870.

Additional information can be found on the village's Web site, http://www.house.gov/htbin/leave_site?ln_url=http://www.gurnee.il.us

Angela D. Sykora can be reached at sykora@pioneerlocal.com